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THE CUBAN NEGRO.

BY LIEUTENANT-COLONEL R. L. BULLARD, U.S.A.

FOR hours I had been conscious of a hollow pounding upon my ears, the distant beating of a tom-tom in the still air of the Cuban evening; but a preoccupied mind had refused to turn to it. Now the air, stirring to a breeze, began to bring other sounds—voices, at first few and low, then more numerous and louder, and at last strange songs, cries and the mingled noises of busy feet and clapping hands. It was the “Congo” dance. For a moment I looked at the grotesque costumes of black men and women with faces barren of refinement, intelligence or thought, yet deep-set with fervor and intent upon this outlandish dance brought from dark Africa; then I turned to go. “Brutes almost,” was the thought that rose to my mind, “brutes, not worth the stumbling that brought me to find them in the darkness.” Yet I paused. “They are men, of the dignity of the image of God and they constitute a real question in Cuba to-day.” White Cuba and America may not turn from them. This is no essay of jeering. If follies and weaknesses are noted most, it is for knowledge and wise action, not for ridicule.

West Africa was the source of the slave supply of all the Western Hemisphere. Whether, therefore, we consider the negro in Cuba or in the United States, we should look to find him in his prime characteristics the same in both places, and so we do. Yet in Cuba he has been subjected to special conditions that differentiate him from his brother in the United States.

In the days of Cuba’s colonization, Spain was a conqueror. When master, the Spaniard has always been a hard, uncompromising one. To maintain these qualities in her colonists, Spain long permitted to come to the New World only the Castilians and others from her southern provinces whose natures, she knew,

had been hardened and made fierce, masterful—nay, cruel almost—by long contact and struggle with the Saracens. She intended that her colonists should be of a nature to spare not, and so they were. Within one hundred years their hard mastership had utterly exterminated the native Indians of Cuba, whom they had enslaved and whom they literally worked to death. The great priest, de Las Casas, seeking to save the unhappy Indians, first, it is said, recommended the introduction of negroes as slaves; but, says history, the father soon helplessly saw that in being kind to the one he had but been cruel to the other race. Negro slaves poured into Cuba and were treated almost as beasts. Their span of life in the fields was five years. Supply, however, was inexhaustible.

With countless women at the master's will, there soon sprang up a race between the mulattoes, the Creoles, free perhaps for the master's blood in their veins. For the honor, the favor or the relief it carried from the bitter toil that had exterminated the Indians and was still sweeping away the African slave, this blood was sought, and the pure blood of their own race disdained by the female blacks and mulattoes. It spread until it filled the land, approximated white and can no more be traced. It has made impossible all clear distinction between races. We may know the extremes, but the means blend. But, free or slave, black or mulatto, the mother's side, the rearing and teaching side, the side that gives character to man, has been essentially negro, and has made the type.

Though they gained greatly in numbers, the freemen did not gain much in progress. They repeated what seems the story of the blood when left to itself; they were soon found lagging. Idleness, superstition and sensualism, the failings of the race, seized upon them. Nature has wonderfully endowed Cuba. Nutritious fruits grew in rich abundance, almost without cultivation; comfort demanded but a poor house, little clothing and less fire; it was hardly necessary to work, and, besides, the climate was hard upon the laborer. Unharried by other men's ideas, the free part of the race naturally and easily held or returned to its African beliefs and practices in religion and marriage—conjury in the one and promiscuousness in the other. Morality does not enter into original African religions. From then until to-day, the Cuban negro freemen have propagated and continue to propagate

largely without regard to family or marriage. To the civilized mind the horror of slavery was its annihilation of the family. With these, family is to a large extent made upon passion and broken on whim; it is little regarded.

The history of Cuba records two or three attempts at insurrection by the slaves to gain freedom. But these were disjointed, pitiful, ineffectual, quickly and easily suppressed. They brought no results. In Cuba's various efforts to throw off the yoke of Spain, Cuban negroes always joined on the promise and in the hope of freedom; but these too failed; and, though some thus attained freedom, the race remained in slavery, unable to save itself, until freedom came at last, not as a victory wrung, but as gift received, from Spain.

As to the negro's part in Cuba's final struggle for independence, no word can be said in derogation of it by his worst enemy. He bore it as the best. Indeed, it was his war. He was the soldier, the man behind the gun, the arm that swung the machete; but this too failed, and Cuba's freedom came to her, exhausted and defeated, as it had come to her negroes, as a gift from another. The race has not saved either itself or its country, and history goes sadly against that boastful feeling which is common among them to-day, that what they are, that they have made themselves.

The sun that made the race made it nocturnal. Night is the time of pleasure. It fills their Cuban villages, quarters and country with voices, music and dance. As non-intellectual, and therefore without personal resources, they are dependent upon their fellows for entertainment and company. They are gregarious in Cuba, as elsewhere. They flock together for fun. In close, airless rooms, they dance the night through, and the morrow cares for itself.

There are two dances, the "Congo" and the "Creole," both protracted perhaps through many nights. The first is a memory or tradition of Africa. In it, men and women, black, real negroes, sing the songs and dance the dances of Africa to the sound of rattles and rude drums, genuine savage instruments. The dance is always significant. It takes many forms of war, love, tradition and conjury, yet it is most addressed to the sexual passions and can but lead to their indulgence. The "Congo" may be seen to-day in any country town in the cane regions.

The "Creole" aspires to be very different. It is a modified

waltz by the more mixed generation, far less interesting, more modern, but not more moral than the Congo. One needs but to see it to be impressed with its sensuality.

There is the usual marked love of music and musical instruments, the guitar, the mandolin, the flute and the piano, a large proportion of the race being performers in the usual "ragtime" upon some of these instruments.

From Africa, with the love of music and dance, they have brought to Cuba, too, as to America, the folk-lore, those animal tales that delight the hearts of children and simple folk. It is for some one to save these for Cuba, as Joel Chandler Harris has done for America.

With Cubans, distinctions on account of race, color and previous condition of servitude are neither sharp nor hard. Not with them, as with English-bred men, does one drop of negro blood make the negro. They are all liberal. All professions and all opportunities are open to all the race, and some have distinguished themselves as soldiers, editors and politicians. Everywhere—in public, in the streets, in the theatres, on steamers and cars—our man of negro blood carries himself with confidence and self-possession. It is his marked characteristic in Cuba. Looking at him, one cannot but be impressed with his great gain in dignity in consequence. He feels himself a worthier man. In rural guard, police and other official positions occupied by him, he conducts himself with steadiness and dignity. Placing him in such offices seems not in Cuba, as in America, to make him foolish and giddy. These are noteworthy things for Cuba and the negro race.

After an absence of thirty years, I went back to find an old nurse living within a stone's-throw of the spot where she had been born a slave, had raised her family and lived her life. No change, no offer, no price had moved her. She was the type of her race in the South. This wonderful love of home, which binds the American negro still to the place of his fathers, seems wholly wanting in the Cuban. He is a wanderer, cares little for family and less for home. He passes easily from place to place; and, in the season of the cane-cutting, migrates in numbers from province to province, a thing unknown among American negroes.

A more striking difference between him and the American is

in the matter of religion. The latter is a devoted church-man, holds long meetings, is a shouter, "falls under conviction" and visits heaven and hell in trances and dreams. Not so the Cuban. It is said of all Cubans that they are religious for baptism, marriage and burial. The negro takes in only the first. For religion in general he cares little, and for that little principally in connection with conjury and the black arts. In families of Spanish breeding and tradition, religious instruction and moral instruction belong to the priest, not the family. Cuba, to be abreast of the age, disestablished the religious instruction of the Catholic Church. With the religious went the moral instruction, for no one has taken the priest's place and the Cuban to-day is largely without moral instruction. The negro went all the further in the direction of indifference, from the revulsion that came with freedom from the law's compulsory religious instruction, which, in slavery times, cut down his short hours of rest and recreation. As above all men his nature seems to call for a religion, he has made up for the loss by an excess of superstition. A large part of the race believes in witchcraft, conjury, spells, dreams, and all the trickery and absurdity of the black arts. These practices and fragments of beliefs have become inextricably mixed up with the Christian religion, producing a mass of foolishness.

The Saints, especially Sts. Barbara and Lazarus, are confounded with memories and traditions of African deities to whom they may bear some resemblance. The laws of Cuba have attempted to suppress the practice of witchcraft and conjury, but have been unable to make much way against them. They have continued in the very highest centres of civilization. The Cuban press shows constant arrests, often in Havana itself, of parties of men and women, assembled for the ceremonies of these arts.

"Obtala" is the chief being appealed to. He is of both sexes and represents the reproductive forces of nature. He is followed by a god of thunders and hot rocks (meteors) and by many others, each with his specialty. To the devotee, these gods or saints do not, it is said, represent principles of good and evil, but forces of nature, or beings who, following their own will without regard to humans, may do the latter much harm in an incidental, careless way, and are so to be provided against, persuaded or even forced, and the conjurer is the one through whom this is done. After gifts and the observance of due forms, sickness is cured, an

enemy is hurt, a revenge given or a sweetheart won by curious prescriptions. To cure toothache the devotee is told to spit in the mouth of a toad; to drive away enemies or disagreeable persons, sprinkle wet bread-crumbs across the threshold; to win her beloved, the maiden is told to tie seven knots in a string, each time repeating his name, then to bury the string with a rag of his clothes, etc. Such things are harmless to everybody except the devotees themselves, whom they keep benighted.

The conjurer is paid for his devices and prescriptions, but he rarely becomes a serious abuse for his impositions in this respect, though he may become much feared. To him it is also given to tell fortunes and interpret dreams. From these he reaps an easy harvest and gains enormously in prestige.

Together conjury and augury exercise a wonderful influence over the minds of their devotees. These not infrequently work themselves into such states of exaltation and fervor that they fall into long trances.

In the mind of the African the right to eat is unconditioned. It does not depend upon work. This makes him a thief, but not a bad one. He steals for his stomach's sake, perhaps a little for his fancy. He is a small thief, never a highwayman. Such is he in Cuba.

He is the largest inhabitant of the jail; but let it be said to his credit that he does not commit against the other race that unbearable crime of which lynching is the common result in the United States. This is a blessed difference. If it depends upon his difference of status and treatment in Cuba, then we have something to learn here.

Tenderness in point of color is of the race and limited to no locality. Everywhere they long to throw it off. The earliest negroes brought to Cuba a sad, faint little belief that after death they should be born again into another land, white men. "Negro" and even "mulatto" must be softened to "*gente de color*" (colored people) and "*pardo*" (brown), while the housemaid becomes "*Señorita*" (miss) and the cook "*Señora*" (lady). These, and the tendency, in the face of manifest aversion, to push themselves as equals upon another race, are discouraging signs of weakness, showing a lack of that genuine independence, self-respect and pride that indicate strength and real worth.

With a quicker temper he is less of a fighter than his Amer-

ican brother, is less devoted to the revolver and black-handled razor. He puts his trust in the more visible, and therefore less dangerous, machete. He is more of a gambler; is more polite, with less regard for the truth—which he can violate with a straight face, carelessly and without expectation of ever being pinned down. His grave defect is lack of serious purpose. Indefinitely he is ambitious for himself and children; but for this very lack of serious purpose he can hardly bring himself to pay the price of success.

We hear negroes everywhere spoken of as “lazy,” yet they produce, we know, a large part of the cotton and sugar of the world. No race can show less for what it does, the difficulty again being a lack of continuing purpose. In Cuba, politically and socially, they desire recognition, but they seek it rather by agitation than by merit or worth. They are certainly unrestricted. All trades, all careers, all professions are open to them, but the same lack of practical purpose causes them to be found usually in the lower occupations. Though found in more professions than in America, they are less industrious there than here. They show disposition but no aptness for commerce, and their inclination in this direction must perhaps be looked upon more as a desire to avoid the hard labor of the fields than as any serious effort to try fortune in trade.

The sentimental for the negro is everywhere above the substantial. The old sergeant whom I encountered in Cuba had piecemeal answered me that he was surer of all substantial rights, surer of justice, better protected by the laws, lived better and earned more in the United States, but he ended with saying: “Ten to one, sir, I’d rather live in Cuba, because here there’s no difference between us and white folks.” He spoke the desire of his whole race. This distinction is their heaviest burden. Said a young man who had followed the American forces to Cuba in the war with Spain: “I’d rather live in Cuba, Colonel, ’cause de cullud peoples here lives married to white folks jes de same es anybody. En dey eats wid um en drinks wid um en talks to um jes de same as anybody. An den anodder thing, dey’s policemans jes de same es white uns.” The ablest of his blood in their longest dissertations have not yet stated as plainly and as fully the whole aspiration of the race as this simple fellow in three brief sentences.

The boast of Cuba has been equality of the races. There are signs in its higher classes of a feeling that they are coming to the limit of this as a living rule. On the other hand, there are indications in the negro race of an intention to demand greater consideration. This points, perhaps, to sharper divisions.

We are accustomed to regard the negro as more impulsive, emotional and excitable than the white man. Looking at the black and white Cuban together, however, one cannot fail to be impressed with a remarkable reversal of the usual here. The negro is the more self-contained, placid, reserved—aye, and dignified. Yet, he has been the man who has filled the ranks of the revolutions. Constituting about thirty per cent. of the population, he yet made up some fifty per cent. of the insurgents in 1898 and eighty in 1906. His ignorance and lack of anchor in world's goods and family restraints leave him free for anything. His color feeling makes him the easy victim of any tale of racial wrong, inequality or injustice, be it never so flimsy. From almost a century of it, he, with all Cuba, has come almost to regard non-submission to government, insurrection and revolution as demonstrating in the man the highest qualities of manhood, independence and love of liberty. Withal he is too apt to go off after the first scoundrel, guerrilla or disappointed politician.

Notwithstanding the whisperings of knowledge and reason, Cubans as yet credit Cuba's independence of Spain to Cuban deeds. There are few who are ready to admit, what the world knows, that Cubans had failed when the "Maine" was blown up. Among the great common bulk there is quiet assumption that they, none others, drove out the Spaniards. So think the black population, who so largely formed the ranks of the revolution. Having taken, as they think, so effective a part in securing the independence of their country, they are inclined to demand a corresponding part in its administration.

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